

11 SELF-CARE



“Secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others.”

—Aviation safety wisdom

SUMMARY

Tending to one’s own emotional health is a critical aspect of trauma-engaged practice. Self-care practices can help adults avoid secondary trauma and burnout, and provide support and positive role modeling for students.

In Our Schools: Sabrina’s Story

Sabrina has been teaching high school for four years. She feels increasingly burdened by her students’ stresses. One student confided to her about a sexual assault when she was younger. Another student is sleeping on different couches and appears to be falling into drug use.

COMMON PRACTICE

Sabrina feels helpless and alone. Some days she feels overwhelmed by her students’ challenges and some nights she can’t sleep. She wonders if she should quit teaching and go into a less emotionally draining field.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Sabrina’s school prioritizes self-care and supportive relationships among staff. Sabrina has been trained to recognize signs of unhealthy stress and burnout, and realizes she needs to

address her own emotional needs. She reaches out to several friends on staff, and they help her make a plan. Her plan includes walking with a friend three days a week after school, finding one fun thing to do each weekend, and turning off her electronics by 9:30 p.m. every night. She also reaches out to her principal, who listens attentively and pairs Sabrina with a veteran teacher for support and mentoring.

Key Research Findings

Working with students who experience toxic stress can be draining. Educators and school staff who work with traumatized children and adolescents are vulnerable to the effects of trauma—referred to as compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress. These effects can include feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally worn out, or feeling overwhelmed by students’ traumas. Active self-care reduces teacher turnover and depression, anxiety, anger and fatigue among teachers.¹

¹ Figley, C. R. (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, Inc.

Self-Care and Secondary Trauma Reduction

It is critical for adults who work with children who experience trauma to support their own well-being. It's easy for compassionate school staff to become overly involved and engaged – to over-identify – with a student who experiences trauma. For some school staff, this can mean they are unable to stop thinking about the situation; and for others, this can result in irritability or detachment. Paying attention to the balance between healthy empathy and over-identification is essential for one's well-being. Self-care and self-awareness are critical to that balance.²

Tips for Educators

Be aware of signs of compassion fatigue. These signs include:

- ▶ Increased irritability or impatience with students,
- ▶ Difficulty planning classroom activities and lessons,
- ▶ Decreased concentration,
- ▶ Denying that traumatic events impact students,
- ▶ Feeling numb or detached,
- ▶ Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts that don't lessen over time about a student's trauma,
- ▶ Dreams about students' traumas, and
- ▶ Personal involvement with a student outside the school setting.

"If I had one wish for every school in the country, it would be that they made time for teachers to really sit down and talk about how they're feeling in the work. It doesn't serve anybody to pretend that we're teacher-bots with no emotions, which I think sometimes teachers feel like they have to be."

-Alaska educator

Don't go it alone. Guard against isolation. While respecting the confidentiality of your students, get support by:

- ▶ Working in teams,
- ▶ Talking to others in your school, and
- ▶ Asking for support from administrators or colleagues.

Recognize compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard. When an educator approaches students with an open heart and a listening ear, it can be hard not to be affected by students' traumas.

- ▶ Don't judge yourself for having strong reactions to a student's trauma.
- ▶ Compassion fatigue is a sign to seek more support and care for oneself.
- ▶ Establish the boundaries you need to ensure your own well-being.

Attend to self-care. Find healthy outlets for navigating stressful experiences. These include exercise, friendships, outdoor activities, and cultural and creative activities. These activities along with mindful practices can help us to create space from both work and stress.

Other self-care tips:

- ▶ Eat well and exercise,
- ▶ Write in a journal and reflect,
- ▶ Use progressive relaxation techniques,
- ▶ Increase Vitamin D to guard against Seasonal Affective Disorder (through supplements, Vitamin-D rich foods, or "happy lights"),
- ▶ Take a break during the workday,
- ▶ Allow yourself to cry,
- ▶ Find things to laugh about, and
- ▶ Visit an Elder for advice on how to care for yourself in the local area or ideas for nutrition healthy fun activities in the community.

Educators can avoid compassion fatigue, in part, by letting go of that which we can't control:

Know what is yours to do. Separate what you wish you could do from what you know you can do. You may feel that you are not doing enough—a sure way of developing stress and feeling overwhelmed. While you may not be able to prevent trauma or remove suffering children from their situations, you can do your job to the best of your ability, with love and compassion for both the students and yourself. Focus on the task at hand and be fully present for your students. You might begin the day by setting an intention such as, *“Today my intention is to do my part in fostering a safe environment for my students...”* And once your intention is set...

“You cannot pour from an empty cup, you must fill your cup first.”

Let go of the result. This is not to say that you stop caring about the efficacy of your teaching, connecting with students, or community building, it is to say that you can practice being less attached to exactly how you think things should look. When we loosen the grip on our ideas about the way things should be, we are much more open to new ideas and new ways of looking at things. Acknowledge the brain's desire for control with humor and compassion, and you create more space to find creative solutions.³

Self-Care in Action: Sabrina's Story

In the scenario at the start of this chapter, Sabrina feels overwhelmed and unsure if she should continue teaching. In a trauma-engaged school, adults are trained and supported in recognizing and addressing their own emotional needs. Here's what happens:

- ▶ Sabrina recognizes signs of emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue;
- ▶ She feels safe confiding in her colleagues;
- ▶ Her colleagues respond supportively and compassionately;
- ▶ Sabrina reaches out to her principal, who responds without judgment and with concrete ideas for support; and
- ▶ Sabrina makes a plan with specific actions and accountability (meeting a friend to walk, scheduling check-ins with a mentor colleague).

IDEAL OUTCOMES

Sabrina feels less isolated and better able to cope with the traumas her students carry with them. She focuses on the things she can impact, such as her classroom culture. She models self-care with her students, instituting strategies like mindfulness breaks for herself and the class. She builds relationships with students and colleagues. Teaching becomes more rewarding for Sabrina, and her students benefit from her positive role modeling and energetic teaching.

- 2 Rodenbush, K. (2015). *The effects of trauma on behavior in the classroom*. [Presentation materials].
- 3 *Six Ways for Educators to Avoid Compassion Fatigue*, Lesley University.



Suggested Steps

1. **Prioritize self-care** in professional learning and the school and community culture.
2. **Foster open and supportive peer relationships** among school staff.
3. **Train all staff** to recognize signs of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma, and to understand that self-care is necessary to be able to support students' learning and students' well-being.
4. **Encourage self-care** among staff and community members who support students with trauma.
5. **Build staff peer-to-peer** support systems.

Reflections

- ▶ How do staff members in your school care for themselves and each other?
- ▶ Have you experienced compassion fatigue or secondary stress? How have you managed it?
- ▶ How does your school or community support adults who work with students who experience trauma?
- ▶ What resources and assets does your community have to offer for recharging? (e.g., wild or other places, people, events, stories, recreation, etc.)

Key Terms

Secondary traumatic stress: The emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Individuals affected by secondary stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma.

Compassion fatigue: The physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal sometimes experienced by those who care for sick or traumatized people over an extended period of time.



